

How sharp is the eye in the sky?

"Verification" is going to be a key word in the upcoming Senate debate on the SALT II treaty. The system by which the Soviet Union and the United States each make sure that the other is complying with the terms of the treaty has been complicated by the probable loss of monitoring bases in Iran. It may be further complicated if Turkey refuses to let our aircraft fly along its border with the Soviet Union.

Loss of observation points in Turkey and Iran would hurt but not be fatal to verification. But the public does not appreciate the sophistication of existing alternatives, in large part because those alternative monitoring systems have been shrouded in secrecy.

That secrecy may be appropriate. Merely indicating the kind of electronic surveillance we use might help the Soviet Union to develop countermeasures. Certainly it would be unwise to say anything about our espionage system. But in the specific area of satellite photography, the White House should rethink its security policy for the sake of showing the public the sophistication of the monitoring systems we can bring to bear on the post-SALT II Soviet military scene.

The Pentagon has never told us just how accurate its space pictures are. Leaks indicate it is possible to get

very high resolution photos from satellites orbiting 100 miles above Soviet installations; unconfirmed reports suggest these pictures can even identify objects as small as a foot across.

Photos in themselves are of limited value, of course. Their utility in the long run depends on the skills of the people who look at them. Furthermore, they have to be used in conjunction with other bits of information to furnish a complete intelligence picture.

But they are excellent tools for monitoring changes in military installations. And they raise questions that might lead to additional intelligence efforts. Most important, they are a guard against temptation by the Soviet Union to trim on its obligations under the treaty. Past monitoring has produced questions by both the Soviet Union and the United States, questions that fortunately led to satisfactory resolution in each case.

The White House, were it to provide more detail about our spy-in-the-sky systems, could reassure the American public about our overall safety without in any way compromising the integrity of our information-gathering machinery. That greater sense of security could, in turn, help the Senate make up its mind about the most difficult issue it faces this year.